‘Requiem of Psalms’

Original work by chorus member to be performed next year at Carnegie Hall

How to get to Carnegie Hall? That's an old joke that has had a recent surge in popularity among members of Chorale Académie. The hackedneyed punchline is, of course, "Practise."

"I never thought it would be moving to Lafayette," said chorale member and Cincinnati native Paul Baker.

The group has been invited to perform "Requiem of Psalms," an original work by Baker, in June 2005 at the prestigious New York venue, under the direction of Jim Haygood. Acadia residents will have the opportunity to be the first to hear the work when it makes its world premiere Friday and Saturday at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension.

The Carnegie Hall performance came about through Chorale Académie director Jim Haygood's connections there.

"Some people who are producers called me and asked if I was interested in coming up," he said. "I had already been up there and conducted. I'm on a rotating list of people they call to come up there and conduct."

The odyssey began in May 2003, when Baker received a commission from Haygood to write what he described as "a large piece of music."

"I said that I had this one running through my head for quite some time and this was the push I needed," Baker said.

Baker set to work on a piece in honor of his late friend, Dr. Ernie Wong. A biologist by trade who now teaches at the Episcopal School of the Ascension, Baker worked in the mid-1990s with Wong, one of the first doctors in Lafayette to work with AIDS patients. Baker helped to track how the then-new drug cocktails affected the virus.

"I wanted the piece to be a tribute to his life," Baker said, "instead of being about his death. I tried to incorporate texts from the Book of Psalms that deal with how to live a good life and what life is all about."

"Requiem of Psalms" was written to be sung by the group, with solos by baritone Kenneth Cheshire, Baker said.

While the piece deals with a somber topic, it is uplifting, said director Haygood. "The idea of his selection is that death is not something to be feared."

Haygood added that it is a piece that should be well-received by the public. "It's not something that is intentionally academic, even though it's well-crafted. There are a lot of 20th-century and 21st-century composers that write to be liked by other composers, but their work is not very pleasing. This is pleasing. It has some very thrilling moments."

"Some of the melodies in the piece are hummable. You're going to remember them."

The piece will be performed this weekend at the 70-voice voices of Chorale Académie, with two of the six movements being sung by the UL Lafayette Children's Chorus, Haygood said.

The university children's group may also be joining Chorale Académie in New York next spring, Haygood said. "That's the plan at this moment."

Other groups from around the country have also been invited to join them onstage at Carnegie Hall to form a group of between 150 and 175 singers. "There will be one from Mississippi, one from Virginia and a couple from here in Lafayette, tentatively."

In the meantime, anticipation mounts among chorale members over their New York trip.

"It's very exciting," Haygood said. "You walk in the back hall and see all the pictures of people who have performed there and it's a humbling experience. You look up and see Tchaikovsky and say, 'What am I doing here?'"

The composer is still incredulous over his pending New York debut.

"Look — I still kind of whisper that," Baker said, "because I don't quite believe it."